

Building the Capacity of Grassroots Organizations: The West African Rural Foundation



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[Photo: Dam construction in the Djibanar valley.]

For many years, farmers in the Djibanar valley of western Senegal have faced a bleak future as salt water, flowing inland from the sea, has degraded local lands and made cultivation of their traditional rice crops almost impossible. The problem has been compounded by an armed conflict in the area as well as the inability of cash-strapped governments to take action to restore their environment.

But the situation is looking brighter since 1995, when the [West African Rural Foundation](#) (WARF) turned its attention to mobilizing the local communities. "The main focus for us is to build the capacity of local organizations, to negotiate with other parties so that they can be effective in their work," said [Adama Ndiaye](#), a WARF Extension Officer, during a presentation with his colleague, [Ngagne M'Bao](#), at IDRC headquarters in Ottawa.

WARF approach

The Djibinar project, designed to mitigate the effects of soil salinization on crop production, illustrates the typical working style of WARF. Based in Dakar, Senegal, the African-staffed Foundation provides grants and technical support to grassroots organizations in five countries: Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, and Mali. Using participatory methods, WARF aims to reduce the impact of cutbacks in state services by improving the technical and administrative capabilities of local organizations, and by working with them to design remedial projects. The Foundation is committed to helping rural entrepreneurs (through skills development), improving conditions for women, increasing the effectiveness of local governments, and enhancing regional integration to facilitate collaboration between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local governments across borders.

WARF's predecessor, the Programme de Recherche et d'Appui aux Associations Paysannes (PRAAP), was formed in 1990, in response to the 1980s fiscal crisis, during which national governments cut most services to rural areas. During this period, many essential services were devolved to village-level NGOs. But since most of them lacked appropriate organizational skills, development experts identified the need for a new type of institution to transfer administrative, financial, and planning acumen to grassroots agencies.

African foundation

In 1993, after three years of experimentation, PRAAP was reborn as WARF — a Foundation run by Africans, which practices the same kind of management oversight that is typical of northern-based donor agencies. (WARF itself has received financial and technical assistance from the International Development Research Centre [IDRC], the Swiss NGO Innovations et Réseau pour le Développement [IRED], and the Ford Foundation).

At the IDRC meeting, Ndiaye and M'Bao explained how WARF's principles of participatory diagnosis and project design can deliver impressive results for modest expenditures. Ndiaye recalled that local groups in the Djibanar valley had approached WARF for help in achieving two goals: building and restoring dams that would halt the continued salinization of their soil, and testing new varieties of rice that were more likely to thrive in salty conditions. Like other parts of western Senegal, the elevation of rivers in the Djibanar valley is approximately sea level. Thus, when drought caused river water levels to drop, seawater had surged inland, leaving salty deposits in low-lying rice growing areas.

Participatory diagnosis

Applying its philosophy to this problem, WARF began by conducting a 'participatory diagnosis'. The analysts from Dakar spent a week in the valley to deepen their knowledge of the local context. During this period, the diagnosis revealed that it would no longer be possible to harvest the rice crop twice a year. According to Ndiaye, the villagers became aware that the reclamation project would have its limits.

The second stage involved negotiation and planning. Local organizational weaknesses were uncovered and addressed, representatives of the various villages attended negotiation meetings, and a local hydrologist was recruited to do much of the technical work. This process helped build a sense of solidarity among people in the valley, which proved very important in stage three, when the participants designed a system for shared management of the local water resources. Existing dams were restored and two new dams were built, in order to reduce damage in a 200 hectare salty zone.

Negotiations

Meanwhile, it was necessary to reach an agreement on when the dams would be opened and closed, as well as a common understanding on land tenure issues, since local farmers stood to gain or lose unequally from this project, depending on the location of their land. For the reclamation program to succeed, this 'gain-loss equation' would have to be fair — partly by redistributing land in the salty area among all participants, and partly by ceding decision-making to a new water-management organization.

Finally, when the water management program was in place, a team that included WARF along with national and regional research agencies applied participatory research principles to the testing of new cereal varieties, so that villagers had the skills and commitment to undertake the evaluation and planting of new crops by themselves. Despite the rekindling of a 17-year old rebel insurrection in 1996, while the project was in progress (after some years of relative calm), the reclamation project was able to proceed. Although meetings had to be shifted from small villages to a larger centre, the goal of halting the salinization was not derailed by the conflict, and both government- and rebel supporters were seen in the public meetings.

"Go slowly and carefully"

Ultimately, concludes Ndiaye, the Djibanar valley project was able to manage a potentially disastrous environmental threat with a very modest financial outlay: about 20 million CFA francs, or CA\$40,000. He believes the project's success is due mainly to WARF's commitment to work at a reasonable pace, and with full consultation. "We have a philosophy that you have to go slowly and carefully. This is always our approach."

Stephen Dale is an Ottawa-based writer. (Photo: courtesy of WARF)

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If you have any comments about this article, please contact info@idrc.ca.

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